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WASHINGTON, D.C. - A Bahraini government-appointed committee should address concerns related to the demolition earlier this year of dozens of Shi'a Muslim religious structures, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

On November 23, the Bahraini Independent Commission on Inquiry (BICI), created and funded by the Bahraini government, released a 500-page report detailing systematic and egregious abuses in the government's response to protests earlier this year. The BICI report includes findings and recommendations related to the destruction of Shi'a religious sites by government authorities.

The BICI received information that 53 Shi'a religious structures were demolished by Bahraini authorities between March 1 and May 11. The report found that, in violation of its own law, the Bahraini government did not give adequate notice of the demolitions nor did it allow judicial review before the demolitions took place. The BICI findings on the destruction of religious sites, and other Bahraini government abuses, affirmed a number of previous reports Bahraini and international human rights groups have issued that came to many of the same conclusions.

"Most of the BICI findings about the destruction of Shi'a religious structures are detailed and specific, including that the timing of the demolitions was 'perceived as a collective punishment' and provoked further tension between the government and the Shi'a population," said USCIRF chair Leonard Leo. "However, the recommendations are incomplete, and do not help ensure that illegally destroyed religious structures are rebuilt or that the Shi'a community is adequately compensated or restituted for loss of religious materials."

Soon after the release of the BICI report, King Hamad al-Khalifa appointed a committee to review how to implement the report's recommendations. The committee is expected to report back to the King in February.

USCIRF urges the committee to address the following concerns during its review of the BICI's recommendations:

- The report recommends the government of Bahrain should "consider rebuilding, at its expense, some of the demolished religious structures in accordance with administrative regulations." USCIRF is concerned that the government may rebuild only a few of the religious structures with legal permits and decrees, and not many of the other structures. In consultation with the Shi'a community, the government of Bahrain should restore or rebuild all the structures that were illegally destroyed;

- The report does not address the loss and destruction of religious materials in some of the demolished structures. The Bahraini government should restore, replace, or compensate the local Shi'a community for the loss of these materials;
- The report's findings do not address allegations by multiple human rights groups that some individual members of the Shi'a community were harassed, interrogated, and arrested for returning to some of the destroyed sites to pray or retrieve religious materials. These allegations should be addressed and officials responsible should be reprimanded and held to account;
- Any Bahraini government officials found to have committed severe religious freedom abuses should be brought to justice and punished under the law; and
- The Bahraini government should issue a formal apology to the Shi'a community for destroying dozens of religious structures that the BICI found clearly violates Bahraini and international law.

"USCIRF welcomes the King's decision to establish the BICI, as well as his public announcement that the government intends to rebuild Shi'a places of worship. It is important that these structures be rebuilt in close consultation with the local Shi'a community and not unilaterally," said Leo.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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